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ABSTRACT

An experimental course on Asian American women, offered by the Department of Family life at the University of Minnesota is described. The curriculum innovation was designed in response to the Asian refugee settlement in the St. Paul and Minneapolis, Minnesota, area. The undergraduate course used a 1982 anthology containing works focusing on Asian women's experiences here and abroad. The course begins with tracing the history of Asians in America and concludes 10 weeks later with a lecture and demonstration on assertiveness training for Asian refugees. An interdisciplinary approach is used and additional topics include: Asians and California Anti-Miscegenation Laws; the life history of a Filipina in Hawaii; family structure and acculturation in the Chinese Community in Minnesota; Asian and white interracial relationships in dating, marriage, and divorce; Asian women and family law; and nursing care for Indochinese refugees. The course faculty, a Caucasian female and a Japanese male, served as role models for the students, hopefully illustrating how issues of sexism and racism could be publicly discussed, argued, and overcome based on classroom dialogues. A student evaluation was accomplished using a questionnaire that dealt with students' diverse backgrounds and their levels of English proficiency, along with the professors' judged competence and course content. A summary is presented of the responses from the 80 refugees, who ranged in age from 17 to 55 with a mean age of 22. Most students immigrated from Vietnam, but Laos and Cambodia were also well represented. (SW)

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ASIAN REFUGEE STUDENTS: INNOVATIVE PROGRAMMING FOR AMERICA'S NEWEST IMMIGRANTS**

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ABSTRACT

The number of Asian Americans in Minnesota today exceeds 30,000 while 1,100 Asian American students, of whom 400 are Indochinese refugees, now constitute the largest minority group at the University of Minnesota. This paper describes how faculty in the Department of Family Life at the University of Minnesota are effectively serving America's newest immigrants by providing an experimental course entitled "Asian American Women."

The author outlines selected course content; describes the team-teaching format; and reviews evaluative procedures in the hope that other family life professionals may find the information useful in implementing programs for this and similar populations.

ASIAN REFUGEE STUDENTS: INNOVATIVE PROGRAMMING FOR AMERICA'S NEWEST IMMIGRANTS

One of the greatest strengths of American higher education is that schools are willing to modify curricula and experiment with new academic programs in order to adequately meet the changing needs of society. This paper describes how faculty at the University of Minnesota are effectively dealing with the increasing enrollment of Asian American students, particularly Indochinese female refugees, within the discipline of Family Life Studies.

The number of Asian Americans in Minnesota today exceeds 30,000, while over 1,100 Asian American students, of whom 400 are Indochinese, now constitute the largest minority group at the University of Minnesota. On a national scale, the 1980 census revealed that the Asian American population grew from 1.5 million to 3.5 million in the last decade, mainly due to massive immigration from Asia and some measures taken by the Census Bureau to minimize the undercounting of minority groups (Tsuchida & Thoen, 1982).

The University of Minnesota has been admitting an increasing number of Indochinese refugees who seek higher education primarily as a means of achieving economic self-sufficiency. Although many of the refugees are older than average students and have had some college experience in their own countries, in general they suffer from serious English language deficiencies and may lack the social skills necessary for movement into the mainstream culture.

With all of the attention being paid by the mass media to Asian refugee families who have settled in the United States as victims of the Indochinese War, one might think that educating and providing social services to these unique people would be of primary concern to family life professionals in this

country. However, those who have been involved in any aspect of education, research or counseling with Asian refugees realize that this is simply not true.

The University of Minnesota is a notable exception to the dearth of schools providing curriculum innovations for America's newest immigrants. This author was able to secure administrative support to provide an experimental family life course for Asian refugees who have settled in the "Twin City" Minneapolis-St. Paul area of the country.

This paper describes the development of a course entitled "Asian American Women." The author outlines selected course content; describes the team-teaching format; and reviews evaluative procedures in the hope that other family life professionals may find the information useful in implementing programs for this and similar populations.

This information should be of interest not only to professionals who deliver direct services to Asian refugee families, but to any educator, practitioner or administrator in charge of developing general education programs on cross cultural aspects of family life. Regardless of whether or not a community has a large Asian settlement, students and staff may enroll in a course entitled "Asian American Women" because they possess an inquiring mind and a curiosity to learn about America's newest minority group.

Development of the Course and Textbook

It is generally known that both female and male Asian refugees face a severe "culture shock" in adjusting to the liberal contemporary family roles and personal sexual freedom associated with their new host country (Mason, 1982; Haung, 1982). Women's Liberation, assertiveness training, divorce, access to birth control, and abortion on demand are not part of the traditional Asian, patriarchal family lifestyle. Inter-generational, inter-personal and intra-personal conflict are exceptionally high in the Asian refugee family

adjusting to a very different way of life than they may have had in Laos, Viet Nam, Cambodia or Thailand. Wife abuse and child abuse are not uncommon side effects of extended families wrestling with assimilation and acculturation issues.

One positive effect of immigration has been the influx of Asian students into higher education. Here at the University of Minnesota we have a ratio of about 1:3 Asian females for every Asian male student. However, there exists no Asian American Studies Department at the University of Minnesota to meet their special needs. The absence of such an academic program makes it difficult for Asian American students to study their history and culture and to learn about their host country.

Because it is extremely difficult to create a new academic Ethnic Studies Department in the current age of retrenchment, the General College of the University of Minnesota opted for introducing new courses dealing with the Asian experience in America. The "Asian American Women" course described in this paper is one such attempt to assist Asian refugee students in building a positive self-image while earning college credits.

During the 1981-82 school year, this author co-developed a grant funded by the University Small Grants Program which enabled her to team teach a course entitled "Asian American Women." The course was open to men and women regardless of race. The grant encouraged but did not fund the compilation of a textbook. However, it was felt that because of the absence of any appropriate reading materials for undergraduates, students would need a suitable text of pertinent readings in quickly accessible form.

With a view to meeting such needs, an anthology for the course was developed and assigned to students as required reading. The anthology, ASIAN

AND PACIFIC AMERICAN EXPERIENCES: WOMEN'S PERSPECTIVES (Tsuchida, Thoen, & Mealey, 1982) contains works focusing on various aspects of Asian women's experiences here and abroad. Some of the twenty-four articles are Asian American authors' accounts of personal experiences of racism and sexism in America; others are interviews conducted and edited in part by this author. The bulk of the remaining articles are previously published academic papers which have appeared in interdisciplinary journals and textbooks.

Course Content

The course begins with tracing the history of Asians in America, which dates back to the mid-19th century when the Chinese started immigrating to the West Coast. It concludes ten weeks later with a lecture and demonstration on assertiveness training for Asian refugees. An interdisciplinary approach is followed throughout the course both in terms of course reading, lectures, and the choice of guests who are invited to talk to the students. A selected list of course topics will give the reader an understanding of this interdisciplinary emphasis:

Asians and California's Anti-Miscegnation Laws

Japanese Prostitution in Hawaii during the Immigration Period

The Life History of a Filipina in Hawaii

Family Structure and Acculturation in the Chinese Community in Minnesota

Asian and White Interracial Relationships: Dating Marriage and Divorce

Asian Women and Family Law

Culturally Sensitive Nursing Care for Indochinese Refugees

This peculiar course content no doubt reflects the academic and personal backgrounds of the professors team teaching the course: the author is a

Caucasian female with a doctorate in family studies and a Licensed Consulting Psychologist in private practice, whereas the co-facilitator is a Japanese male national with a doctorate in Asian studies.

Aside from teaching academic course content, the professors were continuously and purposefully serving as role models for the students--hopefully illustrating that a white female and an Asian male could successfully work together and that issues of sexism and racism could be publicly discussed, argued, and overcome. To reinforce for students that it is appropriate in an American college classroom for male and female professors to disagree publicly about the interpretation of academic materials and to argue vehemently to get their own point of view across to students--something Asian students would be horrified to see in their native countries--the professors purposely left time at the end of each weekly two-hour class session for dialogue with each other and with the students.

Since the professors usually did not agree on the interpretation of the readings, these class dialogues and sex role modeling were not at all contrived. They gave the students and the professors a chance to work through critical issues in both a personal and professional manner.

An actual classroom example will illustrate for the reader how this came about. The author remembers one particularly controversial lecture focusing on issues related to interracial dating, marriage, and divorce between Asians and Americans in this country. Since interracial relationships are usually a source of great inter-generational, inter-personal, and intra-personal conflict for the people involved in such relationships, the professors were careful to bring out personal feelings as well as the usual statistics and case histories during the class lecture.

Students listened attentively to the presentation. Then, as was our class format, we opened up the class for a question-and-answer-period.

One of the more assertive Asian female students directly asked the author if she would consider marrying an Asian male and then posed the same question to my male colleague, i.e., would he consider marrying a Caucasian female. Answering these hypothetical yet highly personal questions openly in a classroom requires a great deal of personal maturity, tact, honesty, and trust with your students. There is a lot of room for hurt feelings and misinterpretation--no matter how you answer--especially with an audience whose native language is not English and may not fully understand the arguments put forth for the 'pros and cons' of this alternative lifestyle.

However, as the course evaluations later revealed, the ability and willingness of the professors to answer these kinds of questions were important for the cohesion and trust which developed in the classroom. (And, as a personal aside, I might add that the course offered an incredible opportunity for personal growth and self-exploration not usually available to the teacher in a more traditional classroom.)

Course Evaluations and Student Characteristics

Evaluation outcomes are, of course, closely related to who is doing the evaluating and who is taking the questionnaire. Therefore, in formally evaluating this course it was especially important that we use an instrument that tapped the rich diversity of students, their limited English skills, and their special student needs. To complicate the problem, one must be careful nowadays of affirmative action rules and invasion of privacy laws which may prohibit professors from asking what used to be considered rather routine evaluation questions.

When a search of the literature revealed no suitable questionnaire, the author put together a short instrument which hopefully taps some critical issues without leaving major distortions. Limited time and resources usually always prohibit any methodological development and testing of such an instrument by the classroom teacher. Evaluation findings of this sort are always to be considered tentative and exploratory. Yet, they are worthwhile, and should be done.

The instrument used for the class was divided into two parts. Part I of the questionnaire dealt with the students' diverse backgrounds and their levels of English proficiency in order to understand their special needs and preparation for the course. Part II of the questionnaire asked specific questions about the professor's professional competence and course content. Selected findings are summarized below.

There were 80 students in the course; 60 were males. Their ages ranged from 17 to 55 with a mean of 22. Most students immigrated from Vietnam, but Laos and Cambodia were also well represented. The majority of students under 25 years of age indicated that they had been college students in their own country, whereas those over 25 years of age usually indicated that they had been engaged in an occupation.

Ranking military officer and political office were the most commonly reported occupations for males; teacher was the most commonly reported occupation for the females.

The pattern of family living showed wide variation. Nearly half of the students reported living with spouse and/or children, whereas many were in households which did not include an immediate relative. For example, some were living with host American families that were co-sponsored by a church organization; others were with an uncle or friends. Few reported living alone.

When asked to rate their English reading and writing skills on a scale ranging from excellent to very weak, most chose "medium" to "a little weak."

As for class standing, most students indicated they were freshman or sophomores. Some were admitted in a category called "Adult Special," a classification traditionally reserved at the University of Minnesota for special populations.

As anticipated, evaluation of the teacher's competency and the students' general attitude toward the course were overwhelmingly favorable. Most indicated that they thought the course was very worthwhile and would recommend it to others.

Discussions of Findings

The class polulation was diverse enough in age, academic preparation, and English proficiency skills to present a major challenge for the teacher.

Regardless of whatever diversities existed among the student population, there was one common factor which they all shared and which could be positively utilized by the teacher: they were all Asian refugees who had demonstrated tremendous courage in their will to survive and who were now anxious to be good students. Their sheer joy about being alive and having a second chance at life and an education made them excellent students. An exerpt from an essay by an Asian refugee attending a local high school captures the intensity of a typical refugee's enthusiasm for learning:

> War! It destroys people's happiness, especially the happiness of children. In infancy, they lose their parents. . .How panicky, sad and desolate are the eyes of a wounded child. They will grow up without education, without warmth and love of family. . .

> I know there are thousands and thousands of them still living in slumlike camps, not enough food, no warm clothes to wear, hoping to go to a freedom country.
>
> Now I am here [in Minnesota]. I go back to school, learning, facing new places, new situations, a different language. . .I'm making the most of my life! (Haung, 1982, p.4)

With such students, it's difficult to say who learns more, the teacher or the students!

Implications of the Asian American Women Course for Family Life Professionals and Social Service Agencies

There is no doubt that the formal course evaluations support the author's own perception that this course has greatly assisted Asian refugee students in building a positive self-image, as well as in combating various forms of subtle and blatant racial and sexist discrimination. The implication of these findings go beyond the formal classroom setting and can be utilized by other family life educators and social service providers in their respective settings.

While it is obvious that a class of this nature can easily be integrated into an established curriculum already in existence in a school or social service agency, the development of such a course in other settings may involve some risk taking.

First of all, this author believes that a community which sponsors a course about Asians does <u>not</u> have to have a large Asian population. Many liberal-minded white Americans and minorities are aware that it is not easy for them to do away with their own racial prejudice against and negative stereotypic views about Asians. The absence of classes about Asians makes it difficult for people who would genuinely like to study Asian family life, history, and culture as a

means of personal growth and self-education.

It is the author's belief that a course on Asians can be offered through a continuing education unit of a high school, college or social service agency and that it would be well attended by Caucasians, Asians and other minorities alike. Careful advertising would no doubt attract an audience that has always been interested in the forefront of ethnic studies courses.

Secondly, the course has great appeal for in-service staff development and administrators. In view of the rising number of Asians in America -- three and a half million strong in 1980 -- many family life professionals would benefit from exposure to a course on this very special minority group. Even if one doesn't work directly with Asian families, an appreciation of the Asian refugees' plight in contemporary America can help with understanding other minority groups in this country.

In sum, whether or not one wants to emphasize the dark side or the bright side of the Asian refugees' immigration to America and their struggle for survival on a foreign shore, a course on Asian Americans has earned its place in contemporary family life curriculum.

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